

FROM WAGON TRAINS TO TOURIST TRAVEL

DEATH VALLEY GOES GLOBAL

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The last wagon train crossed its terrain a century and a half ago. Now, tourists are crossing oceans to experience the uniqueness and serenity of one of the most remote places on earth, Death Valley, California.

"Death Valley is 5,216 square miles of the most ruggedly beautiful terrain you will see in the world," says Chris Fairclough, Executive Director of the Death Valley Chamber of Commerce. "About 70 percent of the Valley is below sea level, and we have everything from

glittering salt flats to the only below sea-level golf course in the world."

Filled with history and legend, Death Valley is a harsh and dramatic landscape. The opportunity to step back in time is boundless, and standing in the vastness of the Valley floor, it is easy to understand the despair pioneers felt when confronting the inhospitable Valley in their search for a better life.

"We've seen a steady rise in international tourists into our park since 1994, when Death Valley became an official National Park," Fairclough says. "It was

about that time that I had begun thinking about ways we could advertise to help boost attendance even further."

Although Fairclough had great ideas, the Death Valley Chamber of Commerce only had a \$64,000 annual budget to operate its visitor center, leaving little in the way of funds for expensive advertising. Mmmm.

Then as luck would have it, Fairclough heard that the U.S. Department of Commerce's export assistance offices in Southern California were showcasing the benefits of overseas catalog shows to its new business clients. Would he be interested in learning how the catalog show program could help the Death Valley Chamber of Commerce? Why sure.

So Commerce and Fairclough went to work. Meeting with the Department's Commercial Service, Fairclough was a quick study. By putting together packages of information and brochures, he learned Death Valley promotional material could be displayed at major international trade and tourism shows overseas through the Commercial Service. He thought: Why not reach hundreds of people and tour operators in a single stroke? Why not indeed?

By the late 1990s, the Death Valley Chamber of Commerce was advertising in catalog shows in Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, and Norway -- shows frequently attended





by people from all over Europe, providing wide exposure for catalog show advertisers such as Fairclough.

“We would send out dozens of packets to these international shows with information on visitor lodging, calendars of events, and scenic highlights for a cost of only about a dollar a packet, and a small fee of a few hundred dollars,” Fairclough says. “It’s a lot of bang for the buck, because we just don’t have the resources to go out and set up shop in these countries.”

The results were significant, as Death Valley saw an 18 percent growth in the number of international visitors, mainly from Europe in the late 1990s.

“I’ve questioned a lot of travelers coming in from Europe, and many of them say they were inspired to visit Death Valley from reading our brochures and contacts with tour operators at these shows,” Fairclough says. “Our participation in Reiseliv ’99 in Oslo, Norway, was particularly good, as we’ve seen a strong growth in the number of Norwegian tourists.”

It is estimated that international tourist growth to Death Valley attributable to participation in Reiseliv ’99 alone amounted to an increase of 16 percent in 1999 over the previous year. This

amounted to an economic impact of \$135,000 in transient occupancy taxes (TOT), (from lodging, restaurants, etc.) for Death Valley. Assisting the Death Valley Chamber of Commerce were the U.S. Commerce Department’s Orange County and Inland Empire Export Assistance Centers and Commercial Service office in Oslo, Norway.

More and more, it’s Death Valley or bust for travelers from other parts of the world too. For example, it turns out Fairclough’s international marketing efforts have drifted over to Japan with promising results: More Japanese arrivals to be guided by a recently established local Japanese tour operator, who will trek Death Valley terrain with tourists in tow.

“The Japanese like to package their trips within a week or ten day window,” Fairclough says. “After visiting Death Valley, they love to go to Las Vegas and shop.”

That’s just fine with Fairclough. “Our peak season is February to April, with summertime being the heaviest for international travel,” he says. “The temperature averages 115 degrees in August, so bring your sunscreen.”

While much of Death Valley’s tourism

growth can be attributed to the site’s designation as a national monument, Fairclough is convinced the combined efforts of the Death Valley Chamber of Commerce and the U.S. Department of Commerce have helped accelerate this growth in recent years.

Since 1988, Death Valley’s TOT has risen from \$285,000 to \$937,000 in 1999. During this time, annual visitation has increased from 285,000 to 1.5 million, with the percentage of international tourists rising from 2 to 20 percent.

The overall impact of increases in international visitorship has resulted in three new hotels, and year-round business, whereas prior to 1996, hotels and other supporting enterprises shut down several months out of the year due to lack of business.

So what is the lure of Death Valley? “I think it’s the sense of size and space, and the fact that international visitors really can’t find something like this at home,” Fairclough says. “Visitors can come here and feel very safe in one of the hottest places on earth,” he says. “It’s just good old-fashioned adventure, come out and visit us sometime.” ■

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